Doll BURNETT
A Free Woman of Color in Caroline County, Virginia

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Introduction

Doll BURNETT was born into bondage in colonial Caroline County, Virginia, sometime in the late 1730s or 1740s, and she lived to see herself, and at least one sibling, recorded as free people of color in North Carolina by the 1780s. Her life sits at the intersection of two threads in early American history: the legal category Virginia created for children born of white mothers and African American fathers, and the household of a local family, the NODENs, who tried to keep her and her siblings in servitude well past the point the law said they should go free. Doll's story is not fully documented—her parents are not named in any surviving record—but the court records that do survive let us follow her, and the family she grew up with, from a Caroline County bind-out order in 1751 to a household of her own in North Carolina by 1787.

Bound Out in Caroline County

On 12 APR 1751, the Caroline County court ordered the churchwardens of St. Margaret's Parish to bind out Dinah, Chloe, Sawny, and Doll BURNETT, described in the record as mulatto children, "according to law."[1] Binding out was a legal mechanism parishes used to place children, often orphans or children the parish considered its responsibility, into another household as servants until they reached adulthood. For Doll and her siblings, that meant leaving whatever home or family they had known and entering the household of Hugh NODEN, a local magistrate.

The timing of the order was not a coincidence. On that same day, the court granted Elizabeth NODEN administration of the estate of her late husband, Hugh NODEN, Gent., with Peter COPELAND, James MARTIN, and Rice CURTIS, Jr. standing as her securities on the bond[2]. Hugh NODEN had died, and the children bound out that day were almost certainly already part of his household—his death, and the resulting need to settle his affairs, appears to be what brought the matter before the court at all.

The Legal Status Behind the Bind-Out Order

To understand why Doll and her siblings were in this position, it helps to understand the law that shaped their lives. Children born of white mothers and African American fathers occupied a distinct legal class in colonial Virginia. The law allowed them to be held in servitude, but only until they reached age thirty-one, at which point they were to be set free. This rule created an obvious tension: masters raised these children for years, often relying on their labor, and many were unwilling to let them go free once they reached the prime of their working lives. That tension produced frequent litigation throughout the colony, and Doll's family was no exception.

The wider group of children connected to this household—Chloe, Dinah, Sawny, Doll, Sarah, and Scilla BURNETT—were, by this reasoning, servants of Hugh NODEN under that very legal status[3]. Their consistent use of the BURNETT surname, despite servitude in the NODEN household, points to a free mother who carried that name; colonial practice generally identified children of this status through the mother's family rather than the father's, since the father in these unions was typically an enslaved or free Black man whose own surname, if he had one recognized in law, rarely passed to his children[4].

Who Were Doll's Parents?

No surviving Caroline County record names Doll BURNETT's mother or father. What the records do allow is an informed, carefully hedged hypothesis. The strongest possibility is that Doll's mother was an unmarried or widowed white woman from the BURNETT family itself, closely tied to the same Caroline County network that included the NODEN, GATEWOOD, and COPELAND families. Two marriages tie the BURNETT and GATEWOOD families together directly: Amy GATEWOOD married John BURNETT II, and Clara GATEWOOD married Joseph BURNETT, suggesting these two families were repeatedly and closely connected, not joined by a single isolated marriage.

If this hypothesis is correct, Doll's mother was most likely an otherwise undocumented BURNETT woman—a daughter, widow, or unmarried relative within this kinship cluster—whose name simply does not survive in the records available today. Her father, in turn, was very likely an African American man living within the same local network, possibly within the NODEN household itself or in a neighboring one connected to the BURNETTs. No record yet identifies him. This remains the leading explanation for Doll's origins, but it is an inference built from

surname patterns, legal status, and family proximity—not a documented fact, and it should be read as a working hypothesis rather than a settled conclusion.

Removal, Resistance, and Freedom

After Hugh NODEN's death, his son and heir, Charles NODEN, attempted to remove Doll and her siblings from Virginia entirely, apparently hoping to take them out of the colony and keep them in servitude beyond the reach of the Caroline County court. When the magistrates learned of his plan, they issued a writ to stop him. Charles NODEN appeared ready to defy that order and was jailed for it; he promised the court he would comply with the law, but he did not keep that promise for long.

On 12 JUN 1759, Dinah sued her master, Charles NODEN, in Caroline County court; NODEN failed to appear[5]. The following month, on 12 JUL 1759, the court ordered his arrest for "removing Dinah, Peter, Sawney, Doll, Sarah and Scilla BURNETT" out of the county[6]—the first record naming Peter and Scilla alongside the four children bound out in 1751, suggesting the family group was larger than originally recorded, or that younger siblings had been born or come of age in the intervening years. By 10 SEP 1762, when the court moved to attach his estate, Richard WOOLFOLK reported that he held nothing belonging to NODEN. Despite these setbacks, the BURNETT siblings ultimately had to sue individually for their freedom as each reached age thirty-one, and each was successful.

The Gatewood-Copeland Network

Peter COPELAND, one of the securities on the NODEN estate bond in 1751, stands at the intersection of the NODEN, GATEWOOD, and BURNETT families, and following his life helps illuminate the wider kinship network Doll was born into. COPELAND was married to Elizabeth GATEWOOD, daughter of Richard GATEWOOD and Patience REEVES[7]. Richard GATEWOOD was the brother of Amy GATEWOOD, who, as noted above, married John BURNETT II—tying COPELAND by marriage into the very family network most likely to have produced Doll's mother. A 1753 will of George REEVES reportedly names Elizabeth as "Elizabeth Copeland" and appoints Peter COPELAND as one of its executors, supporting the marriage connection even though no separate marriage record has yet been found.

Peter and Elizabeth COPELAND appear to have spent time in North Carolina sometime in the mid-1750s to early 1760s before settling permanently in the Virginia counties that became Pittsylvania and Henry. Compiled records place Peter in early Halifax County court records and on the 1767 Pittsylvania tithables list, and by the 1770s and 1780s he and Elizabeth appear repeatedly in Henry County deed and court records, where Peter also served among the county's early justices[8]. This Copeland-Gatewood line did not travel with Doll's branch of the family into North Carolina, but its presence in the same Caroline County legal setting in 1751—standing surety for the very estate that controlled Doll's household—underscores how tightly woven the BURNETT, GATEWOOD, and COPELAND families were in this corner of Virginia.

To North Carolina

Charles NODEN apparently took the family with him when he relocated to Northampton County, North Carolina. He died there, and his will, written 20 DEC 1764 and proved in MAY 1765, left land and enslaved people to support his wife and children until they came of age, with Richard WOOLFOLK named as an executor[9]. The move to North Carolina explains how a family bound out in Virginia in 1751 could end up free in North Carolina decades later, though no surviving Northampton County record has yet been found naming Doll or her siblings individually between Noden's death and their appearance in later North Carolina records.

Doll BURNETT appears in the 1787 census of Johnston County, North Carolina, heading a household that included two white males either under twenty-one or over sixty, and one white female of unspecified age[10]. Her brother, recorded variously as Sawny, Sawney, and later Saunders BURNETT, had already established himself in the same county: on 8 AUG 1783 he was paid voucher number 1189 for nine pounds for militia service during the Revolution, recorded as Saunders BURNET of Johnston County. By 1790 he headed a Johnston County household of twelve people recorded as “all other free,” the census category reserved for free people of color, and he later headed households of eleven such persons in Orange County, North Carolina in 1800, and ten in 1810[11].

Conclusion

Doll BURNETT's documented life begins with a parish bind-out order in 1751 and ends, as far as surviving records currently show, with her own household in Johnston County, North Carolina by

1787. In between lies a story of inherited bondage, a master's attempt to defy the courts to keep her in servitude, and an eventual, hard-won freedom shared with her siblings. Her parents are not named in any record found to date. The most defensible hypothesis is that her mother was an unnamed white woman from the BURNETT family, closely tied to the GATEWOOD and NODEN households of Caroline County, and that her father was an African American man within that same local network—but this remains a working hypothesis built from surname patterns and legal context, not a proven identification. What is documented with confidence is the legal status that shaped her childhood, the family's repeated entanglement with the NODEN estate, and her own emergence, by middle age, as a free woman heading a household of her own.

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[1]Caroline County, VA Order Book 1746-1754, Part Three, 1750-1752, p. 251.
[2]Ibid.
[3]Caroline County, VA Order Book 1746-1754, Part Three, 1750-1752, p. 251; Thomas Elliott Campbell, Colonial Caroline: A History of Caroline County, Virginia (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1954), p. 330; Kimberly Curtis Campbell, Caroline County, Virginia Free Black Community, 1733-1874 (Athens, GA: Iberian Publishing Company, 2018), p. 169.
[4]Kimberly Curtis Campbell, Caroline County, Virginia Free Black Community, 1733-1874 (Athens, GA: Iberian Publishing Company, 2018), p. 169.
[5]Caroline County, VA Order Books 1746-1754, p. 251; 1759-1763, p. 153.
[6]Caroline County Order Book 1759-1763, pp. 91, 369.
[7]Compiled Gatewood and Reeves family material citing the 1753 will of George Reeves.
[8]Compiled Copeland and Gatewood materials placing Peter Copeland in Pittsylvania and Henry County, VA records, including the 1767 Pittsylvania tithables list and Henry County deed and court records of the 1770s-1780s.
[9]Northampton County, NC, Will Book 1, p. 120, Will 80.
[10]1787 census of Johnston County, NC.
[11]1790, 1800, and 1810 federal censuses for Johnston and Orange Counties, NC; North Carolina Revolutionary War voucher no. 1189, Saunders Burnet, 8 August 1783.